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ABSTRACT

A study employed a Burkeian framework in order to determine the nature of Al-Anon's rhetoric and evaluate the success of the organization's rhetorical strategies in appealing to the co-alcoholic population that it addresses. According to Kenneth Burke, a message is persuasive if the audience perceives a commonality with the central beliefs of the rhetor. This commonality may be predicted by analyzing the order and dominance of the five factors that comprise every verbal message: agent, agency, scene, act, and purpose. Examination of the rhetoric of Al-Anon reveals that the dominant rhetorical factor is the agent, the alcoholic, whose activities perpetuate or change the situation. Analysis of the membership of Al-Anon reveals that most Al-Anon members have worldviews that are typically associated with a conservative political philosophy: they adhere to traditional models of men's and women's roles, they have a strong belief in God, and they believe that individuals must "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" to improve their lot in life. The general absence of professionals, minorities, or those without strong religious affiliations can be explained by other studies which have shown that those whose political beliefs are conservative tend to follow agent-dominated philosophies (such as Al-Anon's). Rhetorical analysis suggests that Al-Anon's persuasive appeal is limited to audience members who share the organization's worldview. (Fifty-eight references are appended.) (ARH)

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# The Rhetoric of Al-Anon: A Burkeian Analysis

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Abstract

This rhetorical criticism employs a Burkeian framework in evaluating the rhetorical strategies of Al-Anon and the appeal of the organization's message to its audience. Burke's pentad is employed in analyzing Al-Anon literature and delineating the worldview or interpretation of reality underlying Al-Anon's rhetoric. The guilt-purification-redemption process Burke proposes to account for human motivation is also identified in Al-Anon literature. This rhetorical analysis suggests that Al-Anon's persuasive appeal is limited to audience members who share the organization's worldview.

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# The Rhetoric of Al-Anon: A Burkeian Analysis

The ABC presentation of "Shattered Spirits" in January 1986 was a significant breakthrough in the media's depiction of alcoholism. A made-for-television movie, "Shattered Spirits" portrayed the devastating effects of alcoholism on an entire family, probing the dimensions of a disease which is reported to affect one in three American families (Collins, 1982). Network (1985), published by the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), minces no words in underscoring the importance of the movie's message on alcoholism: "'Shattered Spirits' offers yet another opportunity for society to break its denial toward what may be the most prevalent, devastating, complete, and encompassing disease in our midst" (Gravitz, 1985, p. 4).

Statistics support NACoA's description of alcoholism as a crucial societal concern. It is estimated that the lives of 70 million Americans, representing a wide range of ethnic and social backgrounds, are altered by alcoholism with an economic cost of over $100 billion (Franks, 1985). In addition, alcohol abuse in the United States has been linked with fifty percent of all automobile accidents, fifty percent of all homicides, and one-quarter of all suicides. The social, economic, and psychological toll of alcoholism on the nation is well-documented.





What is less well-documented is the treatment of alcoholism as more than an affliction of the individual. While numerous researchers define alcoholism as a family disease (Bailey, 1965; Black, 1981; Deutsch, 1982; Dulfano, 1982; Jackson 1954, 1956; Seixas & Youcha, 1985; Wegscheider, 1981; Woititz, 1983; Woodside, 1982), most research has focused on treatment aimed at helping the alcoholic stop drinking (e.g., Bailey & Leach, 1965; Cahalan, 1970; Jellinek, 1960; Mendelson & Mello, 1979). Little research has been concerned with programs, such as Al-Anon, which are designed for the co-alcoholics, estimated to be 56 million in the United States alone (Franks, 1985), who are affected by alcoholics. It is this population, those potential members of Al-Anon, which is of concern in the present study.

More specifically, this study is an exploration of the link between Al-Anon rhetoric and the audience it addresses. This rhetorical analysis seeks to identify the nature of Al-Anon's rhetoric and the success of the organization's rhetorical strategies in appealing to the co-alcoholic population. Pursuing this line of inquiry involves a Burkeian analysis of Al-Anon literature and delineation of the characteristics of both potential and actual Al-Anon members.

## A Burkeian Framework

Burke (1945, 1984) offers two methods of analysis useful to the rhetorical critic. Derived from his dramatistic view of human behavior, Burke's (1945) pentad and the process of guilt, purification and redemption in human motivation (Burke, 1984) provide a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of a rhetor's message.

For Burke (1945), our everyday activities are a drama, with our actions guided by our symbolic ordering of the world. Our interpretations of the world are created through the purposeful use of symbols and these overt verbal behaviors indicate the motives behind their use (Burke, 1945, 1950, 1966). Individuals select particular symbols over other alternatives in response to a situation. In this manner, people develop strategies which allow them to order their world and function in their environment. These strategies are what Burke (1945) is interested in, for in identifying these, the motives underlying the response can be determined.

We create our perceptions of the world verbally, then react based on those linguistic descriptions. According to Burke (1945), any description will answer five questions: who, how, where, what, and why. These constitute the pentad, with the corresponding labels: agent, agency, scene, act, and purpose. The terms are interrelated in that all five are linked together in some order when a view of reality is presented (Burke, 1945). The ordering of the elements and which one tends to dominate the speaker's vocabulary reveal her/his basic approach to the world. In evaluating a rhetorical message, the critic is concerned with the ratios and dominant element most frequently observed (Ling, 1970; Peterson, 1986). As Ling (1970) explains, identifying the prominent term to which the other four are held subordinate reveals the strategies a rhetor employs in describing reality. Ling (1970) further argues that to increase the audience's identification with the rhetor, the vocabulary chosen should correspond with the way in which the audience describes the world. For a message to be persuasive, the





audience must perceive a commonality in the central beliefs of the rhetor which underlie overt actions. The rhetorical critic is able to compare the way in which the rhetor and audience order elements of the pentad in describing reality to determine the extent to which each identifies with the other.

In addition to the pentad, Burke (1984) employs the guilt-purification-redemption process to describe how individuals respond to the human condition (Brock, 1972). When our attempts at progress bring us into conflict with the hierarchical structure of society, we can either accept or reject what the hierarchy mandates. Acceptance leads to order; rejection to disorder and feelings of guilt. The desire to regain organization prompts an act of purification in which the individual either claims responsibility (self-mortification) or finds a scapegoat (victimage). Redemption is then attained and the hierarchy is re-ordered (Burke, 1984).

## The Pentadic Ratio in Al-Anon Rhetoric

Al-Anon's stated goal serves as a basis for identifying Burke's (1945) pentadic elements:

> "To help families and friends of alcoholics by offering hope and friendship, by providing the opportunity to learn to grow spiritually through living by the Twelve Steps adopted from Alcoholics Anonymous, and by sharing experience in coping with the disease of alcoholism and how the program helps in giving understanding and encouragement to the alcoholic" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972a, p. 4).

The elements are delineated as follows:

1) act--coping behaviors and attitudes of the alcoholic family;

2) scene--the alcoholic family/home;

3) agent--the co-alcoholic, or spouse, relative, friend, of the alcoholic;

4) agency--following the Al-Anon program;

5) purpose--alcoholism is a family disease.

Burke (1945) is interested in more than simply establishing the elements of a message. To establish Al-Anon's worldview, the ordering of the elements and which one seems to dominate must be considered. As the foundation for Al-Anon principles, the Twelve Steps provide an excellent starting point for this aspect of the analysis. Adopted from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the Twelve Steps are the "guides for the lives and growth of individual members" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1980, p. 13), and provide the basis for the program. These instructions for a way of life are to be followed in order, for each step builds on the previous one (Ablon, 1974).

"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1980, p. 3) is that First Step the newcomer must take. Members are directed to turn their energies toward managing their own lives, which is why Al-Anon is frequently referred to as a "selfish" program (Ablon, 1974; Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973). The co-alcoholic no longer accepts responsibility for the alcoholism, and is thus free to concentrate on improving her/himself and to care for others without trying to control them.





The Second and Third Steps involve believing in "a Power greater than ourselves" and making "a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we under(stand) Him" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b, p. 40-41). This greater power, however, does not provide the ultimate answer to life. More powerful than the individual, God is a super-agent (Burke, 1945), there to lend a hand and offer guidance. The Al-Anon member consciously makes the decision to accept that guidance from God and acknowledges the inability to handle problems without His help. Coming to this realization is crucial in following the program successfully. As Al-Anon's book of daily sayings states: "I have observed that those who readily accept the help of a Higher Power make the best progress in the Al-Anon program" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 121).

Steps Four through Ten further reinforce the controlling nature of the agent in Al-Anon's principles. While co-alcoholics are unable to change the alcoholic, they can make changes in their own thoughts and actions. Members "take an honest look at (themselves) as (they) really are" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b, p. 43), focusing attention on their own faults and how they have affected others. These wrongs must be admitted to prepare for removal of "these defects of character" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b, p. 45) by God. Amends are made to the people Al-Anon members have hurt because of such character flaws as self-pity or intolerance. This process of introspection and taking responsibility for wrong-doings is a continuous one for Al-Anon members. "Daily vigilance and review will be found a small price to pay for what we get in this way of life . . . . Immediate acknowledgement of our errors will

keep the slate clean and keep us prepared to make each tomorrow better than today" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b, p. 50).

In practicing the Eleventh Step, those in Al-Anon form a personal relationship with their Higher Power. This step stresses the spiritual as opposed to the religious nature in the program, advocating meditation as a way of staying in contact with God and monitoring inner processes. "My conscious contact with Him depends entirely on me, on my desire for it" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 312). His aid allows the individual to direct her/his own life and not be "at the mercy of forces I cannot control" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 312). As an Alateen member writes in Al-Anon's monthly magazine, "God is the best friend any of us ever had. 'He' is always there to listen to your prayers and help in every way" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1970, p. 1). God or the Higher Power is not some mystical being, but is a friend who is stronger than the individual and can be relied upon as a super-agent (Burke, 1945).

Carrying the message of hope to others who have a drinking problem in the family is presented in the Twelfth Step. This does not mean that Al-Anon goes door-to-door spreading the word. Indeed, according to Al-Anon doctrine, the organization member does not attend meetings to save others, but to share experiences and possibly gain new insights into her/his own behaviors (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973). When someone does reach out for help, Al-Anon members are more than willing to explain the program as it has worked for them (Ablon, 1974). Advice is not given because people must take responsibility for their own actions. "I do not know what course of action is right for anyone else. I can offer





only comfort and compassion and the good example of the life I am trying to build" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 57).

The emphasis on a Higher Power or God, mentioned in the Second, Third, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eleventh Steps, seems to contradict the agent orientation of Al-Anon's message and indicate purpose as the dominant element. This, however, would be a misinterpretation of the concepts Burke (1945) sees as associated with purpose. God described in purpose-dominated terms is grounded in the philosophic school of mysticism and is a "'divine essence,' 'creative source,' and 'the Being of beings'" (Burke, 1945, p. 287). There must be "a unity of the individual with some cosmic or universal purpose" (Burke, 1945, p. 288). This is not the view of God presented by Al-Anon, which discusses God as a helping hand, friend, and someone who offers guidance. This personification of God is more consistent with the agent as the controlling factor, not purpose, in that God becomes a super-agent. Burke (1945) alludes to this when defining the pentadic elements, stating, "in mythologies war is an Agent, or perhaps better a super-agent, in the figure of the war god" (p. xx).

Personifying ideas, such as the Higher Power in Al-Anon, is indicative of idealist philosophy (Burke, 1945). Idealism, according to Burke (1945), features the "properties belonging to the term agent," employing such terms as, "the 'self,' 'consciousness,' 'will,' (and) 'spirit'" (p. 171). These terms are evident in Al-Anon's Twelve Steps and the way in which members are to apply these principles to their lives. Brock (1972) also describes the link between idealism and agent

which is consistent with Al-Anon rhetoric: "Furthermore, the dominance of agent grows out of the spiritualization of the family. . . . (I)mportant human economic relations (are) idealized or spiritualized" (p. 321).

It is apparent from this analysis that Al-Anon first asks "Who?" followed by "What?" The dominant pentadic element in the Al-Anon literature examined has been shown to be the agent, whose activities perpetuate or change the situation. The implications of the relationship between the act and the agent performing it are outlined by Burke (1945):

> "(T)he act-agent ratio more strongly suggests a temporal or sequential relationship than a purely positional or geometric one. The agent is an author of his acts, which are descended from his being good progeny if he is good, or bad progeny if he is bad, wise progeny if he is wise, silly progeny if he is silly. And, conversely, his acts can make him or remake him in accordance with his nature. They would be his product and/or he would be theirs" (p. 16).

These links between the agent and the act are evident in Al-Anon's message and indicate an act-agent or agent-act ratio. Those who are emotionally close to the alcoholic are affected by the drinking and become as sick as the drinker (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1967, 1972b, 1973, 1981). The nagging, screaming, complaining, and threatening the co-alcoholic displays are also sick and only serve to make the situation worse (Kellermann, no date). Admitting the inability to control





another, changing one's own attitudes and actions, and attending to one's self not only improves the situation, but leads to peace of mind for the individual (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b).

Al-Anon members go through a specific process on their "road to recovery." There is a sequential relationship between the agent and act. The individual, with the help of Al-Anon, the pentadic agency, comes to realize that her/his own faults need to be corrected in order to manage the problems in her/his life. As the warped way of thinking is transformed to a sane one, behavior becomes rational, the home life is less stressful, and the co-alcoholic achieves a degree of serenity where before there was chaos. In Burkeian terms, sick acts are performed by sick agents who are able to "change their acts" and thus themselves.

### The Guilt-Purification-Redemption Process in Al-Anon

Burke's (1984) conceptualization of guilt is more deeply rooted in human motivation than that of more common definitions. Guilt is not just feeling badly about, for example, forgetting a family member's birthday. Burke (1984) views guilt as stemming from the individual rejecting the hierarchical structure in which s/he is enmeshed. Guilt occurs when the reaction to the existing order of authority is not accepted. This leads to disorder for the individual, who is then motivated by guilt to reorganize the frame of reference.

These feelings of guilt are clearly evident in Al-Anon's position on alcoholism and its effect on the family. Alcoholism is considered a family disease because the people closest to the problem drinker become

embroiled in its compulsive syndrome. Adjusting to the alcoholic's inability to function appropriately requires family members to reject the socially-prescribed family order (Seixas & Youcha, 1985; Wegscheider, 1981), which according to Burke (1984) leads to feelings of guilt. Further, family members "react to the drinking, try to control it, are ashamed of public scenes but try to handle it in private. We (family members) become obsessed with trying to get the drinker to stop. We take on the guilt, feel we are to blame or become resentful. . . . We become sick, too" ( Al-Anon Family Groups, 1979, p. 2). This private illness made public brings the family into conflict with other social institutions, such as the church, place of employment, and community groups family members may be affiliated with. "Social relationships outside the alcoholic's family circle may often be almost as disturbing as those at home. Gross flouting of the conventions brings ostracism, not only of the alcoholic, but of the whole family" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b, p. 21). Family members are unable to "satisfy all the requirements of (the) traditional hierarchies" (Brock, 1972, p. 318), and therefore suffer guilt in attempting to fulfill some obligations at the expense of not meeting others.

To manage guilt feelings, family members typically blame the alcoholic, the alcohol, themselves, or some combination of these three sources (Black, 1981; Seixas & Youcha, 1985; Wegscheider, 1981). Wherever co-alcoholics place the blame for family and interpersonal problems, the underlying assumption is that if the alcoholic would just stop drinking, everything would be all right (Black, 1981, 1985; Deutsch, 1982; Wegscheider, 1981). Action is therefore organized toward





trying to get the alcoholic to stop drinking. This strategy typically meets with little success (Jackson, 1954, 1956; Seixas & Youcha, 1985).

The Al-Anon program shifts the focus of guilt away from alcohol and the alcoholic to the co-alcoholic. Al-Anon members must view guilt as due not to the alcoholic's behaviors, but as stemming from their own behaviors. "We are in Al-Anon to get rid of our own feelings of guilt and hostility" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 127) toward the alcoholic. Al-Anon members are not to blame themselves for "driving the drinker to drink" as Al-Anon takes the position that individuals cannot control others' behaviors (Ablon, 1974; Al-Anon Family Groups, 1967, 1972b, 1973; Zimmermann, 1987). Rather, Al-Anon members must accept their share of the blame for problems within the family and recognize their faults as contributing to the difficulties being encountered. As Ablon (1974) observes, "Many women talk about the fact that now they have to examine their marriage and family life for the first time without being able to blame every difficulty on the alcoholic. . . .Some say it is a good thing that the alcoholic did not achieve sobriety for years because they themselves were so imperfect that a sober man would not live with them" (p. 40). In this manner, the family member takes on responsibility for her/his own actions and the rejection of the present situation.

Once members see themselves as not responsible for the alcoholic's drinking, but as responsible for their own problems, they can begin the process of redemption. Attainment of redemption is achieved through self-mortification by changing their own misguided behaviors and

attitudes, not those of the alcoholic. Purging the guilt involves an act of purification, which according to Burke (1984) can mean a set or series of behaviors the individual must perform. In Al-Anon, this is following the program.

If redemption is to be reached, the degree of guilt and the method of purification must be equal (Brock, 1972). Guilt for the co-alcoholic is life-long because for AA and Al-Anon, "once an alkie, always an alkie" whether the alcoholic is drinking or sober (Ablon, 1974; Greil & Rudy, 1983; Kurtz, 1982; Thune, 1977; Zimmermann, 1987). Even if the alcoholic should die, the alcoholic family would persist, along with the guilt (Black, 1981, 1985; Seixas & Youcha, 1985; Wegscheider, 1981).

Al-Anon's definition of alcoholism as a disease which can be controlled but not cured, requires that the striving for redemption be a daily, life-long activity. One Al-Anon daily reminder states: "Al-Anon is a twenty-four hour program. . . I will always keep in mind that today is my sole concern and that I will make it as good a day as I can" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 79). The principles of Al-Anon must be applied every day by members for attitudes and behaviors to change in a manner which will purge the feelings of guilt. An Al-Anon pamphlet (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1980) describes how individuals change in the process of redemption: "In following the (Twelve) Steps, we can gain courage and serenity. Gradually, we leave weakness behind and learn that growth, though painful, is worth suffering" (p. 3).





Summary

This analysis of Al-Anon literature reveals the organization's fundamental arguments for managing the conflict inherent in the alcoholic family:

1) Alcoholism is a family disease, affecting the mind and spirit of each family member. It is a defect of character which can never be cured, resulting in the guilt associated with the disease being life-long.

2) The act of purification involves accepting blame not for the alcoholism, but for problems within the family due to one's own faults.

3) Redemption, in the form of serenity, is attained by "working the program" faithfully every day, as purification from guilt is a daily process in the program.

This is the plot that Al-Anon has constructed in its portrayal of the alcoholic family. Central to the process of recovery is blaming the self for conflict within the family, supporting the position that the agent is the dominant pentadic element. The Twelve Steps, as guidelines for following the program, emphasize that the individual must change her/his own attitudes and behaviors, with the aid of a super-agent, God, in order for the home life to improve.

If the agent is viewed as the controlling factor, then to modify a situation, the agent must be the originator of change (Burke, 1945). For Al-Anon, this means that attempts to alter the scene, such as having the children stay with relatives, not allowing liquor in the house, or

physical separation from the alcoholic, are not appropriate actions. The co-alcoholic, as the controlling element in the scene, can respond effectively only along those lines which are agent-centered. The process of recovery or change in Al-Anon thus is: The co-alcoholic (agent) consciously decides to entrust her/his care to a Higher Power (super-agent) who offers guidance in changing attitudes and behaviors (act), using the method presented by Al-Anon (agency), which will improve the home life (scene), since alcoholism is a family disease (purpose).

## Al-Anon's Rhetorical Strategies

Several themes or rhetorical strategies employed by Al-Anon may be delineated from this Burkeian analysis of the organization's literature. First is the theme of daily purification, which is based on the definition of alcoholism as a family disease for which there is no "cure." Guilt is inherent in the family because its structure is a continual source of conflict. The act of purification must be a daily one to equal the degree of guilt. This theme is highlighted in a December entry of One Day at Time in Al-Anon: "Again I resolve to live the coming year one day at a time, easing myself of the burdens of the past and the uncertainties of the future" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 366).

The act of purification requires improvements in the individual, which will in turn improve the family situation. This second theme, that of good behavior resulting in a good home life, could be labeled The Total Woman (Morgan, 1973) approach. An Al-Anon pamphlet suggests:





"It helps everyone concerned if we are kind and courteous. A cheerful encouraging manner creates a pleasant surrounding. In Al-Anon we can learn how to try to put the past to rest and treat each day as it comes with confidence and hope" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1979, p. 3). Just as Morgan (1973) argues that a wife can boost her husband's ego so he will allow her to redecorate the living room, so can the Al-Anon member retain a pleasant disposition and make life for the alcoholic and the family happier. This is not to imply, however, that the co-alcoholic is responsible for the alcoholism. Rather, the co-alcoholic must take responsibility for her/his own behaviors which contribute to internal family conflicts.

Checklists for applying this "Total Woman" theme can be found in Al-Anon's (1967) The Dilemma of the Alcoholic Marriage and bear a striking resemblance to Morgan's (1973) methods. While Al-Anon takes the position that the wife does not cause her husband to drink, the wife's behaviors are seen as possibly exacerbating the problem. Because the wife is affected by the alcoholism, she is therefore as "spiritually sick" as her husband (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1967). A few of the questions this Al-Anon publication suggests each wife of an alcoholic ask herself include:

1) Do you get breakfast for your husband?

2) Is it a good breakfast for a man about to do a day's work?

3) Do you look human in the morning? Overnight hair, makeup remnants, hair curlers, crumpled nightie, housecoat, or last week's apron? . . . .

16) Do you look nice when he comes home, a subtle complement to him? . . . .

21) Do you think you're just as attractive as you were when you were going steady? Could you improve your figure, your complexion, your posture, your hairdo, your clothes? (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1967, pp. 60-62).

This process of changing attitudes and behaviors is not done alone, and implies a third theme. Al-Anon members have a friend they can turn to, a Higher Power who is always there to offer support and guidance. This strategy of personifying God is clearly stated in the Eleventh Step: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1972b, p. 51). In practicing this step, members are reminded, "I must play a part in solving my problems, but my Higher Power will provide the guidance and the strength to take the right action" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 34). This view of God is necessary for consistency with the previous themes. If God did determine the individual's fate, then changing attitudes and behaviors would be in vain, for the outcome would not be affected.

A fourth rhetorical strategy employed by Al-Anon is simplification, or defining abstract concepts in concrete terms. Ablon (1974) observes, "The essence of Al-Anon is practicality, and the emphasis is on pragmatic action rather than introspection . . . Even when abstract concepts such as acceptance or gratitude are discussed, they are





concretely illustrated in terms of personal experience or in parables or stories that precisely hit a familiar chord in the member" (p. 39). Members are instructed in one Al-Anon slogan to "'Keep it Simple,' because it is simple, and our slogans prove it" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973, p. 205).

The significance of this rhetorical analysis lies in the relationship between the worldview implicit in Al-Anon's message and the audience the organization is addressing. If Al-Anon is to be successful in helping co-alcoholics, then the majority of its audience should identify with an agent-dominated description of reality. If audience members do not share Al-Anon's worldview, then the rhetorical strategies employed by the organization may not be the most appropriate choices for this situation.

## The Al-Anon Membership

The requirement of respecting AA and Al-Anon members' anonymity is pervasive in the organization's rhetoric. One saying, frequently displayed at meetings, underscores this rule of confidentiality: "What you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here." Only members' first names and last initials are used and anything discussed in a meeting is not to be repeated outside the confines of the meeting (Ablon, 1974; Greil & Rudy, 1983; Thune, 1977). Principles may be explained to others, but not personalities or those people involved (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1973).

Analyzing this audience, both potential members and those who join Al-Anon, is no easy task. In reviewing previous research on AA, Bebbington (1976) found that "the major . . . difficulty besetting attempts towards an assessment of AA as a method of treatment through any approach lies in the nature of the organization. Attendance at AA involves a complex process of affiliation of which only part is related to influences effecting a progression from inebriety to sobriety. This and the anonymity of the organization make for the elusiveness of hard data" (pp. 578-579). Al-Anon, based on the same tenets, shares these difficulties in any scrutiny of the program and its membership. And, as Bebbington (1976) points out, if a group were to open itself to inspection, "the results would relate to a group whose behavior and traditions were different from those of AA as we know it" (p. 579). While this rhetorical criticism in no way breaks the anonymity of individuals in the Al-Anon program, any attempt to directly evaluate the audience and its response to Al-Anon's message may be seen as a threat to member anonymity. Therefore, data concerning the audience relies on observations of several Al-Anon meetings and the findings of previous researchers (Ablon, 1974; Bailey, 1965; Jackson, 1954, 1956; Zimmermann, 1987).

Who does belong to Al-Anon? Ablon (1974) offers this description:

> "The majority of Al-Anon members in the groups observed are white middle-class women in their thirties, forties, and fifties. At all the meetings, however, there are a few women younger or older. The average member is in her thirties or forties, has been married from ten to 20 years, has had from two to five children. A large





> proportion, more than one-half, of Al-Anon members are Catholic . . . . They are accustomed to seek out priests, ministers, or general medical practitioners about their problems, although many are so ashamed of the particular problem of excessive drinking in the household that they may confide in no one" (p. 31).

Bailey (1965), Jackson (1954, 1956) and Zimmermann (1987) also note that most Al-Anon members are women, middle-class and middle-aged. Further, Bailey (1965) describes the membership educational level as above that of wives of alcoholics who are not members of Al-Anon, although "better educated" is not precisely defined.

A recent survey conducted by Al-Anon's World Service Office generally supports the observations of these researchers (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1985). Participating Al-Anon groups in the United States and Canada were selected randomly on the basis of geographic location. Analysis of the survey responses found that women comprise 88% of the membership and the average age is 44 with over half of the members between 36 and 55. Almost three-quarters of the women and 56% of the men are married. Most Al-Anon members are employed, with 21% in clerical positions and 23% in executive, professional, or managerial positions. The educational level of the Al-Anon membership is mixed, with just less than one-half reporting at least some college experience.

This demographic information on the Al-Anon membership implicates more abstract constructs such as members' basic beliefs and perceptions of reality (Ling, 1970). Further, Ablon (1974) and Zimmermann (1987) provide insight as to Al-Anon members' philosophical position. First,

while many Al-Anon members are employed, the women are in positions typically associated with traditional female roles, such as nursing or clerical work. Those women who are in executive or managerial positions still view their husbands as the primary breadwinner (Ablon, 1974). Al-Anon members, then, tend to adhere to the traditional societal model of men's and women's cultural roles (Borisoff & Merrill, 1985). Second, consistent with this conformity to prescribed social roles is the women's strong religious ties, as Ablon (1974) found in the groups she observed. Third, Al-Anon members emphasize the role of individual determination and motivation in achieving goals and objectives (Ablon, 1974; Zimmermann, 1987). Al-Anon members seem to have a firm belief in the power of God, a strong commitment to the traditional family structure, and a belief that individuals must "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" to improve their lot in life. These beliefs are typically associated with a conservative political philosophy or worldview (Ling, 1967).

This connection between Al-Anon members' beliefs and their political philosophy is important in light of Brock's findings (Ling, 1967). As Ling (1967) notes, Brock provides operational definitions of four political positions based on an analysis of the rhetoric associated with each one. Basic characteristics may be identified in the language of each political philosophy. Examining samples of political rhetoric using Burke's (1945) pentad, the dominant element of each political position is delineated as: 1) reactionary--purpose, 2) conservative--agent; 3) liberal--scene, and 4) radical--agency (Ling, 1967).





In describing a situation, an individual's vocabulary reflects her/his political philosophy or worldview. For example, to combat increasing crime rates, the conservative would advocate stiffer jail sentences to keep criminals off the streets, the liberal would propose social reforms to change an environment which produces a high incidence of crime, the reactionary would form a vigilante group, and the radical would try to transform the criminal justice system to an entirely new method of dealing with crimes and those who commit them. Each places blame for the problem on a different pentadic element, thus indicating differing worldviews.

If Al-Anon's worldview is an agent-controlling one as suggested by the analysis of the organization's literature, and if the members do tend to hold a conservative political philosophy or worldview, thereby indicating an agent orientation, then there exists a high degree of identification between the Al-Anon program and those who join. This in part explains the general absence of professionals, minorities, those with advanced college degrees, and those without strong religious affiliations--in essence, co-alcoholics who do not have a conservative worldview. For people who do not share Al-Anon's agent-controlling vocabulary, Al-Anon's message is not persuasive.

For the Al-Anon program to "work," those who join must either share the worldview Al-Anon proposes, or they must adopt Al-Anon's vocabulary within the context of the alcoholic family (Thune, 1977; Zimmermann, 1987). Those who have a liberal worldview and therefore have a scene-dominated vocabulary, must employ an agent-controlling one when

discussing alcoholism if they want to become involved in Al-Anon. The necessity of "speaking the language" is supported by Thune's (1977) study of AA and Zimmermann's (1987) delineation of the Al-Anon culture. Further, Ablon (1974) observed that new Al-Anon members were encouraged to absorb Al-Anon terminology before talking during meetings.

An emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to religious nature of the program does not negate its obvious parallels with Western Christian philosophies. The guilt-purification-redemption process underlying the Twelve Steps of Al-Anon is consistent with the values of major religious denominations in the United States (Mead, 1970). "Once an alkie, always an alkie" translates into lifetime guilt for co-alcoholics, making it necessary to continue the act of purification (working the program) as the individual strives for redemption. Kurtz's (1982) historical analysis of AA supports the necessity of members having to incorporate the organization's conceptualizations of sin and guilt in order for the program to be effective. Therefore, without a belief in the notions of sin and motivations arising from feelings of guilt, Al-Anon's guilt-purification-redemption process is not a viable one, since the assumptions it is built upon would not be seen as valid. This would account for the majority of Al-Anon members claiming close religious ties and the absence of admitted atheists, agnostics, and "non-Christian" faiths.

The importance of accepting and employing the language of AA's program is discussed more specifically by Thune (1977). Thune (1977) argues that the alcoholic's life history is the mode for the





organization's transmission of values and beliefs. Thune (1977) asserts: "If the program is to be available to them, members must establish some form of congruence between their life histories and the group model" (p.84). Further, Thune (1977) argues that the life history has become a kind of metalanguage in the AA organization "through which members discuss and redefine the structure of reality" (p. 87).

Ablon (1974) focuses on topical themes evident in Al-Anon's program. The themes this researcher describes share some similarities with those delineated in the present analysis of Al-Anon literature. Ablon (1974) posits that members must accept "one basic didactic lesson and three operational principles (which) are paramount in the Al-Anon process" (p. 35). The didactic lesson involves relinquishing responsibility for the alcoholic's behavior, and accepting responsibility for one's own actions, the basis for daily purification. Ablon's (1974) first two operational principles, detachment and improving self-esteem, parallel the "Total Woman" rhetorical strategy Al-Anon employs. The third operational principle, accepting the guidance of a Higher Power, is consistent with the personification of God found in the present rhetorical analysis. Implicit in all three of Ablon's (1974) operational principles is keeping the program simple, i.e., application not theory.

These studies support the argument that in order for individuals to claim success in AA or Al-Anon, there are specific concepts, principles, and philosophical positions which members must internalize. For Burke (1945), Al-Anon's audience must share the organization's worldview to be

persuaded and follow the program. Evidence presented concerning Al-Anon membership establishes a link between Al-Anon's description of reality and that of the people who join. What also becomes apparent is that the Al-Anon membership is composed of only a select group of its potential audience. This suggests that while Al-Anon may claim universal appeal, in actuality, it is not being realized.

## Implications

This application of a Burkeian rhetorical framework to Al-Anon literature and its audience has implications for the organization, organizational communication inquiry, and rhetorical theory. Further, this analysis underscores the utility of a critical-interpretive approach to the study of symbolic discourse and the contributions rhetorical theory can make to enhancing our understanding of communicative phenomena.

Several important issues are raised by this rhetorical criticism concerning Al-Anon's message and the audience the organization intends to reach. First, the analysis suggests that Al-Anon appeals to and "works" for those whose vocabulary is consistent with that of the organization. This is consistent with Thune's (1977) conclusions concerning AA and Zimmermann's (1987) analysis of the enculturation process newcomers experience in the Al-Anon program.

Second, the description of reality underlying Al-Anon's message is shared by a specific group of people. Thus, while success as measured in numbers indicates this program is a functional one, it is found to be





so only for certain individuals. Ablon (1974) argues that "(Al-Anon) members are a self-selected population who customarily would not be ready candidates for traditional group or individual psychotherapy" (p. 31). However, the present analysis would suggest that Al-Anon members are a self-selected population due to identification with Al-Anon's worldview implicit in the organization's rhetorical strategies. Further, Al-Anon's survey found that almost one-half of its membership sought some type of counseling after joining Al-Anon, with psychological counseling perceived as the most helpful (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1985), seeming to contradict Ablon's (1974) assertion.

Third, Al-Anon's claim of the program's universal appeal is not supported in the present analysis. Al-Anon's vocabulary and rhetorical strategies chosen restrict the audience members who will be receptive to the program's message. This finding is particularly important in light of Al-Anon's increasing concern with Children of Alcoholics (CoAs) and Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoAs) (O'Gorman, 1986). Thus far, the organization's strategy has been to apply Al-Anon principles and practices to CoA and ACoA issues (e.g., Al-Anon Family Groups, 1984). The present rhetorical analysis would suggest that the persuasive appeal of Al-Anon's message to this specific co-alcoholic population would be limited to those with conservative philosophical positions or those who could learn to internalize Al-Anon's vocabulary in interpreting their experiences with alcoholism.

There are, however, limitations associated with this rhetorical criticism, particularly in the analysis of the Al-Anon membership and in

information concerning the co-alcoholic population. As Ling (1970) argues, the description of the audience requires that the rhetorical critic make certain judgments as to its nature. Inferences are drawn from the available information on the audience, then used as a basis for delineating the audience's worldview. More data on alcoholic families and on the Al-Anon membership would allow for more informed judgments concerning the audience's worldview. However, Ling (1970) notes that the speculativeness in the analysis of the audience is inherent in a Burkeian model.

In addition, reasons other than rhetorical ones may account, in part, for the presence of few professionals, minorities, and men in the Al-Anon program. White-collar workers, such as lawyers, physicians, and dentists, may severely damage their careers by admitting to a drinking problem in the family before a group. While anonymity is protected in principle, there is still the chance of someone talking to others outside the organization. Family and friends of the alcoholic implicate the alcoholic by attending Al-Anon meetings. Moreover, those with increased financial resources are in a better position to seek private help and individual therapy.

At a more global level, this application of a Burkeian framework in examining Al-Anon's rhetoric and its audience highlights the utility of stepping out of the functionalist paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and employing a critical-interpretive approach to organizational communication. Goodall, Wilson, and Waagen (1986) similarly demonstrate the value of rhetorical theory in organizational study. These





researchers employed Burke's (1950) theory of motives in identifying the reasoned dramatic motives common to performance appraisal interviews. This application of a critical framework focuses attention on organizational members' symbolic discourse within the interview context and provides an explanation for participants' interpretations of their organizational experiences.

Peterson's (1986) pentadic analysis of agricultural conservationists' rhetoric during the 1930s Dust Bowl gives further evidence of the utility of a Burkeian framework in examining symbolic discourse. Arguing that the rhetoric of Dust Bowl conservationists had little persuasive appeal due to the dominating conflict between scene and purpose elements, Peterson (1986) suggests that the farmer as the agent in this rhetorical situation had been reduced to a passive role. Further, Peterson (1986) argues that conservationist rhetoric has not changed, explaining continued environmental abuses by land users in spite of government attempts at control. For environmental rhetoric to be effective, "conservationists would profit from emphasizing the primacy of human action as a moving force" (Peterson, 1986, p. 19). This action-oriented rhetoric would stress the direct link between environmental conditions and farmers' actions, leading to conservation as act rather than agency.

Employing Burke's (1945) pentad and theory of motives (Burke, 1945, 1950, 1984) in examining symbolic discourse has been shown to be a powerful analytic tool for the rhetorical critic. More importantly, the present analysis of Al-Anon's rhetoric and Goodall et al.'s (1986) and

Peterson's (1986) work demonstrate the utility of rhetorical theory across a wide range of communicative phenomena. The increasing call for a return to a central concern with messages in interpersonal communication (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1985; Miller & Knapp, 1985; Owen, 1987), organizational communication (e.g., Conrad, 1985; Smircich, 1985), health communication (e.g., Sigman, 1985; Thompson, 1984), and mass communication (e.g., Bennett & Edelman, 1985; Bormann, 1985), clearly implicates many areas in which rhetorical theory can greatly contribute to our understanding of symbolic discourse. Further, methods of rhetorical criticism allow for the description, explanation, and evaluation of rhetorical strategies embedded in social discourse and action. As communication scholars continue to turn their attention to messages, rhetorical theory and knowledge will provide a sound basis for research pursuits.





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